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An Investigation Into the Discourse of Modern Sports Coaching

Bill McCartney, an NFL football coach said that “All coaching is, is taking a player where he can’t take himself” (McCartney). Essentially the coach provides that extra push to motivate an athlete mentally and physically past their personal limitations. Debate arises when considering best coaching strategies to surpass this barrier. Additionally the question of why certain methods are more effective. What sets them apart and can they be taught to improve the coaching field as whole.

Their are many ways coaches work to improve their players. Physical training, one on one mentoring and team speeches. In this paper I am going to explore primarily the one and one coaching rhetoric to analyze how coaches can best communicate with players. I will also briefly discuss team communication by looking at some in game speeches from real coaches. This really is an important topic because from a young age so many people are impacted by sports and specifically their coaches. David Bernstein, in his article for the New York times, explains the enormous impact coaches can have on children:

If you ask a random group of adults to recall something of significance that happened in their fourth or fifth grade classroom, many will draw a blank. But ask about a sports memory from childhood and you’re likely to hear about a game winning hit, or a dropped pass, that, decades later, can still elicit emotion. The meaning that coaches or parents help young people derive from such moments can shape their lives (Bernstein).

Essentially sports create intense emotional experiences and the coach is responsible for turning those experiences into positive or negative learning for their players. However the importance of coaches interpreting these situations with proper rhetoric is not just important for youth with young formative minds. The emotional aspect plays a huge role as players move into collegiate and professional sports where the pressure intensifies from the fans, media and internally within the player. Coaches must help these athletes play at a very high level consistency and improve over time even as the pressure increases from success. The book Understanding Sports Coaching points out that this cannot be accomplished with a traditional model of drills and how to manuals. Coaches must be made aware of the “social and educational dynamics” that create players identities and philosophies, and that lead to athletes ability to to perform (Cassidy, Jones, Potrac 7). This is such a complex idea and is often avoided by most sports writers which is another reason why I believe its necessary to explore in detail.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before investigating discourse in coaching, discourse must be thoroughly defined within the context of coaching. According to Cassidy, discourse is the language “used to describe and explain coaching.” He goes on to explain that the study of discourse is then an “examination of how influence is achieved in and through talk; of what is said and the way it is said” (Cassidy, Jones, Potrac 115). It looks at the power that language has over player perception and behavior. But why does discourse hold such power over players? According to Alan Stein its because discourse builds relationships. These relationships are established on the basis of respect, trust, communication and comprise (Stein). The better these characteristics are shown between player and coach, the chances of a great relationship will increase. This allows the player to trust the coach’s decisions and the coaches to respect and understand their players needs.

Even within the study of sports coaching discourse there is some large divergences. The dominant discourse of coaching is focused on performance training, and rational and scientific study. All this is built upon a rigid “hierarchical coach–athlete relationship” (Cassidy, Jones, Potrac 118). The book continues explaining that in this view the body is viewed as a machine. One that can be manipulated and tuned to function at peak performance. All this through specialized exercises and training regimes (Cassidy, Jones, Potrac 118). The continues with evidence to support this claim on the popular state of coaching discourse:

The topics covered at a conference sponsored by the UK Sports Institute (2002) entitled ‘Leadership: World Class Coaching’. They included the biological and rationality dominated ‘Optimizing trunk muscle recruitment’, ‘Athens – heat, humidity and pollution’, ‘The pose method running’ and ‘The performance enhancement team’, among others, leaving delegates in no doubt as to what sort of knowledge ‘expert’ coaches should have (Cassidy, Jones, Potrac 118).

As a result coaches have been taught to take control of the coaching process. Thus leading to this hierarchal structure where the player is servant to the master – the coach. Hettinger explains that this leads to discourse that condescends the players and places the coaches knowledge and experience on a pedestal.

One of the biggest problems with this scientific hierarchal structure is that it doesn’t account for individual diversity of athletes (Hettinger). A winning coach using this philosophy would believe that he could continue to do the exact same things year after year and achieve the same results with completely different players. One important aspect of diversity that is discarded in this traditional model of discourse is racial and cultural heritage. As a result an entirely new field of study has opened up called (CSP) cultural sport psychology (Schinke). Proponents of CSP believe that “culturally reflective approaches to sport offer athletes and coaches of different cultural origins an opportunity of engagement into respectful negotiations” (Schinke). Robert Schinke wanted to test these ideas so he conducted a study on elite aboriginal athletes who competed in Caucasian dominant Canadian sports. He found that “indigenous peoples conceptualize sporting and health practices different from the Eurocentric model.” They tend to be more community oriented with a focus on “components that are both culturally and spiritually meaningful” (Schinke). For example many of these Aborigines before entering a professional sport must consult their family and close friends. One native said in an interview that before he could start professional boxing he needed “permission through the community.” Many of the athletes studied also articulated that that the intricate relationship between spirituality and cultural could be embraced by the coach and used to enhance player performance (Schinke).

One participant of Schinke’s study expressed that coaches should care more about creating great people that can help their community rather then just athletes. David Bernstein expresses this same idea in the strata of youth sports in his article on the New York Times. He discusses an organization called the positive coaching alliance (PCA) that works to spread a message that “youth sports is about giving young athletes a positive, character-building experience ― not to become major league athletes, but to become major league people” (Bernstein). The PCA works to accomplish this mission through online digital training that is being distributed to thousands of coaches across the country. It stresses that its ok to win and excellence should be a goal. However it should all happen on the basis of “relentlessly positive” influence leading to quality trusting relationships (Bornstein). Schinke study takes this idea a step further, showing that it’s not just positivity, but also a deep empathetic understanding. Athletes expressed that they were often subject to racism, cultural prejudice and “misrepresentation in the mainstream cultural discourse” (Schinke). Interestingly however athletes indicated that when recent immigrant coaches came in they tended to not have many of the biases and stereotypes. Thus they would ask questions and genuinely be interested in the athletes backgrounds. “Contrary to the ‘color blindness’ that many non-immigrant coaches use to attempt to erase the difference, immigrant coaches seek to understand the difference” leading to a better connection with the player (Schinke).

This new racial contemplation in coaching is just one of the ways an alternative discourse is being studied. Not one to reject all earlier conceptions but rather one that changes the “power arrangements upon which highly rationalized sport discourse is based” (Cassidy, Jones, Potrac 123). This new philosophy would reject the current coach–athlete structure in favor of one that provides equitable relationships. One example for developing this type of disc rouse would be to place value and importance on the knowledge each athletes brings from their unique perspectives (Cassidy, Jones, Potrac 118). Hettinger points out that this makes the coach seem more humble because he acknowledges that he doesn’t know it all and collectively as a team they are much stronger. Cassidy explains that using this idea and incorporating player specific information into practices allows players to be more efficient, developing where they need it most.

When considering a change of discourse its also important to ponder the effect of gender biases from both players and coaches. One surprising statistic that alludes to this being an important issue is that after Title IX, and the increased participation in female athletics, the number of female coaches has decreased (Frey). A study conducted on female athletes revealed some interesting themes conferencing discipline and structure, personal relationships, passivity and aggressiveness, and coach preference. 66% of the women preferred a male coach. Each category also contained noteworthy observations. Female believed that male coaches had a much more rigid structure and discipline policy. Female coaches were described as more flexible, which sometimes hurt the integrity of the team. For example players who showed up late for a male coach were disciplined according to the policy while female coaches would often listen first for the reason and then evaluate the proper discipline. Unanimously however females were seen as better at creating nurturing relationships with players. They were also seen as more passive while male coaches were more aggressive in their interpersonal and public discourse (Frey). It seems that many of the qualities associated with great coaches are also typically found in the male gender.

One area where discourse is exposed and public is the “pregame” speech. Most discourse between coaches and players takes place one on one but game speeches are different. They address an entire team and can set the tone for the athlete’s emotional state for the entire game. Hettinger explains that this is an especially important piece of rhetoric for coaches to understand because of its special place in the minds of athletes and its temporal relationship with game situations. McMurphy in his article asks the question of what makes an effective pregame speech. He analyzes specifically the Super Bowl, one of the most hailed events every year. There is obviously much controversy as to what to say in a moment of such pinnacle emotion. However Don Shula, who has head coached in more Super Bowls then anyone, provides some valuable insight: “What you try to do is do the things that got you to where you are. You don’t want to be someone that you’re not. The thing I tried to do is summarize what it took to get there” (McMurphy). Some coaches like Coach Gruden in Super Bowl 37 said that it was the team’s “destiny” to win this game. Other coaches like Coach Brian Billick before Super Bowl 35 said that they should “approach this like any other game” (McMurphy).

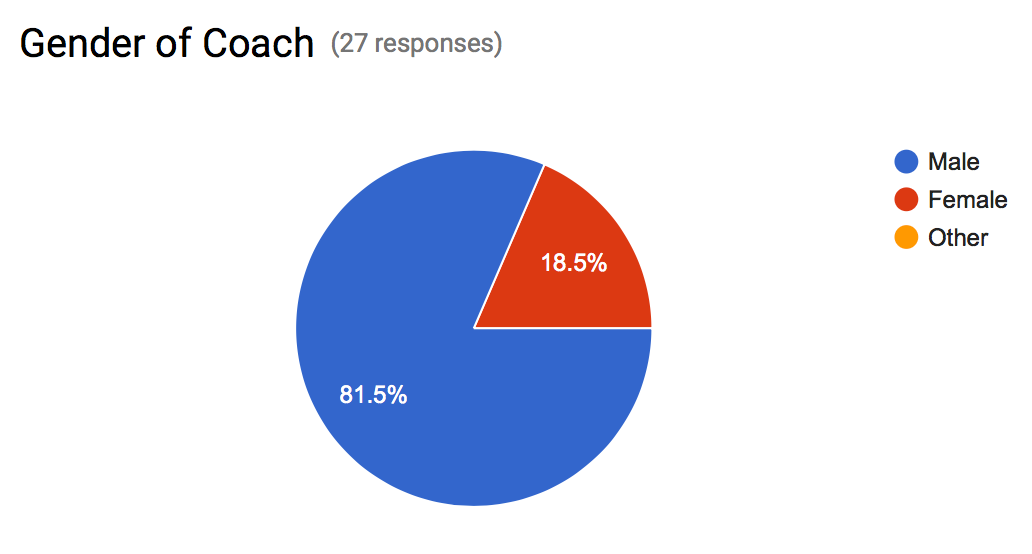
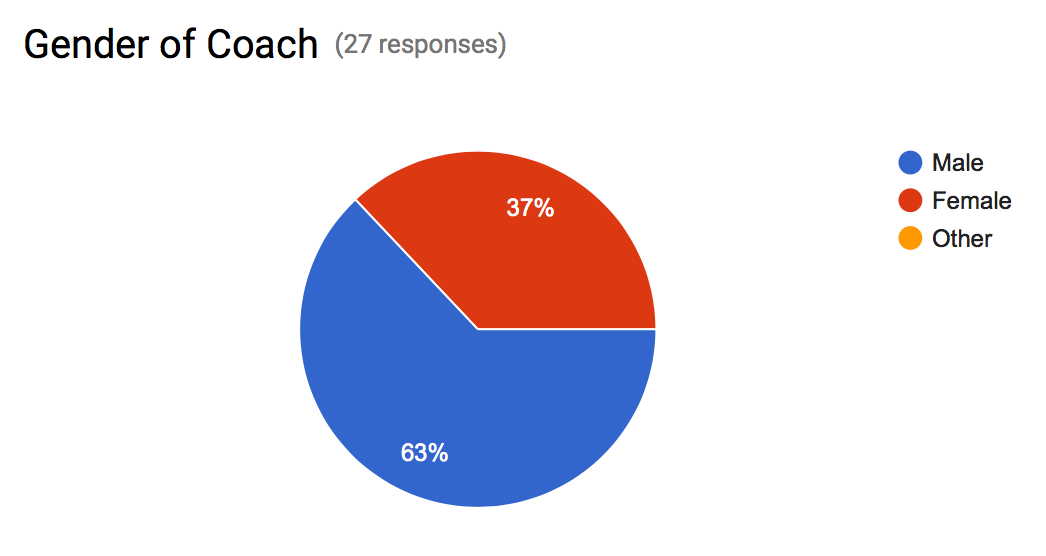
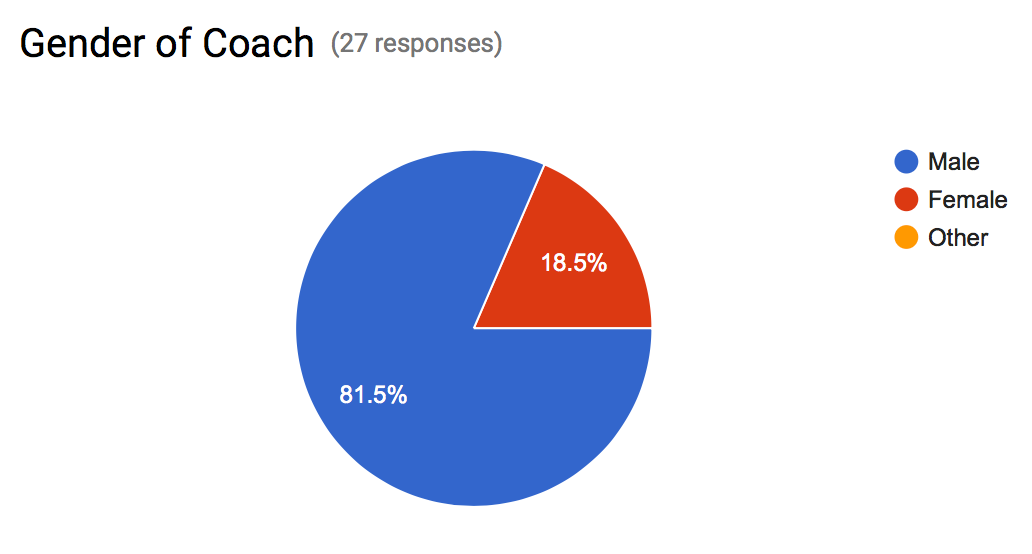
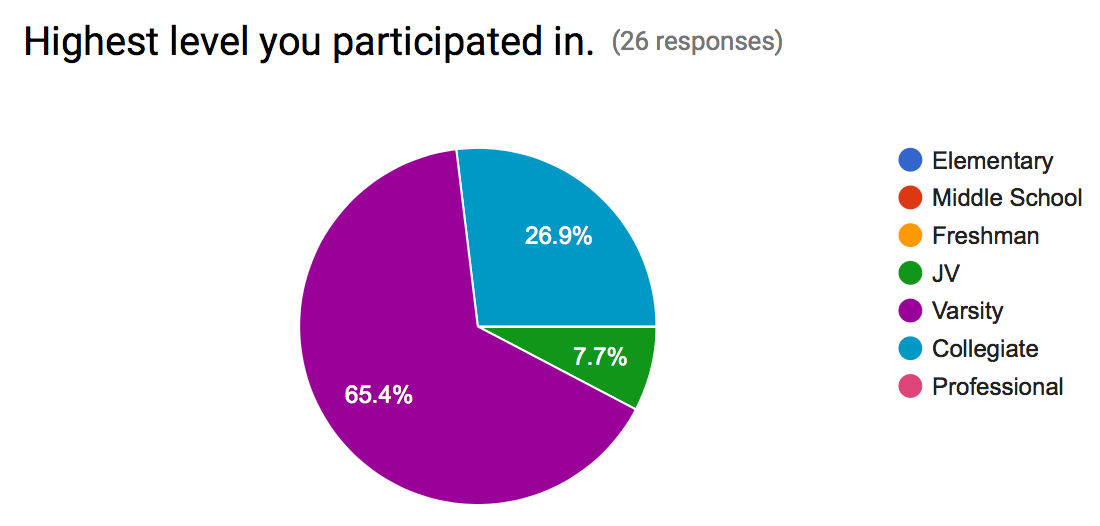
Despite differing opinions about pregame speeches there are some common threads that run through great speeches. Hettinger explains that from his analysis of speeches from several different sports and levels of play, a speech should “help [the] players fully comprehend their situation” and their incredible opportunity. He continues by describing the “heavy emphasis” coaches should place on empowering their players to “step up to the occasion and cherish the moment.” Hettinger also details the interesting and frequent use of ideographs throughout many of the best speeches. An ideograph is a “word frequently used in political discourse that uses an abstract concept to develop support for political positions” (“Ideograph – rhetoric”). In the context of coaching words like “pride” and brotherhood” accomplish this rhetorical strategy. Hettinger gathers from his research that ideographs are very important in “big game scenarios.” He goes on to extrapolate that “perhaps concentrating all of a team’s emotions onto one key factor allows for the effective channeling of emotions.”

As shown their are many ways discourse affects the player coach relationship but could technology allow coach’s to ascertain even better the right things to say. Many in the sports industry resist technology because of the “practical nature of sport, and the relatively passive use of computers (Dickson). Dickson continues to explain how computers are no longer just 2d machines but have the “capability [to] illustrate the spatial characteristics associated with skill execution.” VR technology allows simulation of real physical skills in a virtual environment (Dickson). Additional technology like wearable microchips allows coaches to “track player workloads, rehab progress, acceleration, jumping and more.” All this data puts the focus on individual player needs and allows coaches to better dress those needs. Additionally video tools like GoPro and other mobile cameras allow unique perspectives and instant feedback on player performance (Devitt). All these tools save coaches time and give them invaluable insight they are able to filter and share with their players.

PRIMARY RESEARCH METHODS AND FINDINGS

To delve deeper into the rhetoric of coaching I wanted to conduct primary research. This primary research would be in the form of an online survey that allowed people to rate qualities of their best and worst coach and how each type of coach made them feel. I chose this type of research because I wanted to gauge the importance of certain traits in a coach impact the emotions of players. Because each trait is linked to specific discourse I can then link specific words and ways of speaking to the impact they have on players emotions. I hope to find some surprising patterns between desired characteristics and common conceptions of desired characteristics. I want to get to the heart of what makes a good coach and also rank these “good” qualities in order to determine what’s most important to the player and perhaps what’s sets a great coach apart from a good one.

Based on research of good and bad coaching characteristics I compiled a list of six qualities that both the “best” and “worst” coach was rated on. The ratings were on a scale of how much the trait was displayed ranging from *almost never* to *very often.* Additionally after rating each coach survey takers rated their own feelings while on the team using the same scale. Four specific emotions were selected and used for both types of coaches. Also the coaches gender was identified. Finally the survey concluded with selective demographic information of the survey taker including gender and highest level participated in. This section was included in order to find more connections between type of athlete and coach and locate any potential biases that could exist in the data.



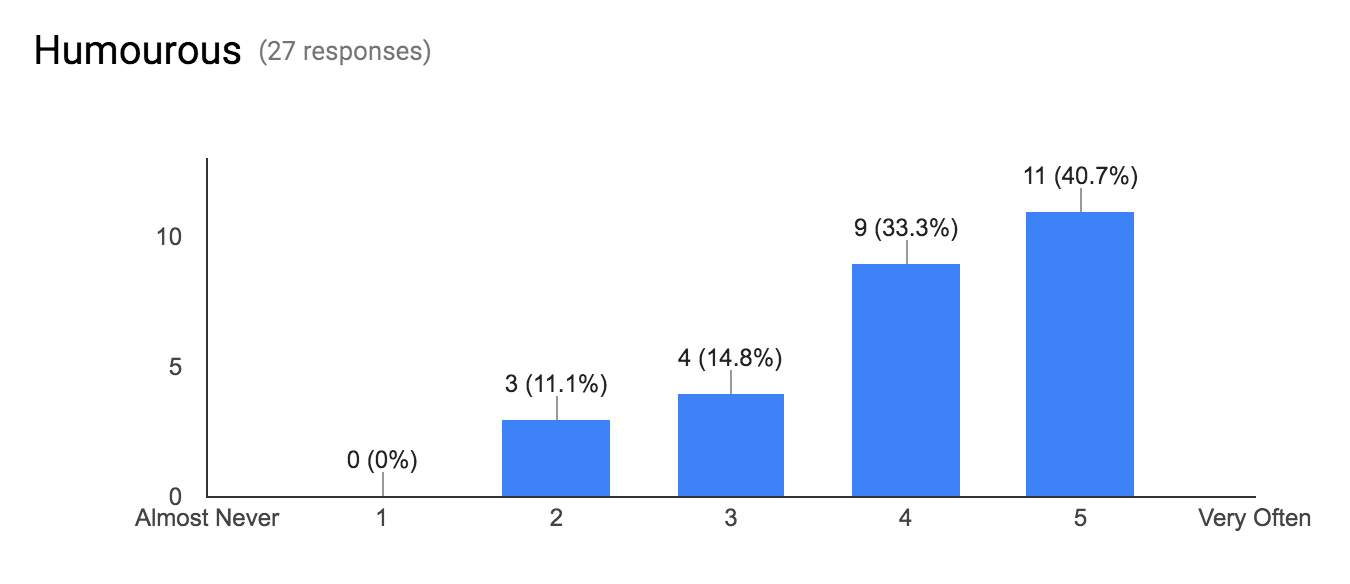
*Figure 2*

**Worst Coach**

*Figure 1*

**Best Coach**

Survey respondents were exactly 2/3 female and 1/3 male with achievement levels between JV and Collegiate level (Figure 1). Figure 2 shows the gender breakdown of the best and worst coach selections. Its interesting that even though a majority (66%) of survey takers are women, male coaches are selected far more often as the best coach. This could indicate a gender bias from all types of players towards male coaches, which would support evidence brought by Melinda Frey in her article in “The Sport Journal.”

Frequent favoritism and low humility were important characterizations for the worst coaches. While this seems to obvious its interesting that frequent favoritism and low creativity was not that much of negative for great coaches. However humor (shown in figure 3) was very important in determining player’s best coach. Notice how the bars increase exponentially stepping up to *very often*. It shows that humor is an important quality perhaps even more then creativity and low favoritism and is on par with humility.

Another interesting observation gathered from the data shows that fear and anger were felt by players from both their good and bad coaches. However the difference and was in the motivation and happiness categories. The worst coaches made players feel very unmotivated and unhappy while the best coaches did the opposite. This demonstrates that fear and anger can be great motivators as long as they are kept in balance with joyful emotion.

*Figure 3*

DISCUSSION

Coaching is educating players and while some can be done through actions most communication comes through discourse. As shown earlier the nature of the discourse can drastically effect player emotion and performance. Thus it is important that coaches are given the latest knowledge and tools to most effectively communicate the correct and needed rhetoric. The first important aspect is the summative coaching philosophy. In the ebook *Understanding Sports Coaching* the point is made that the traditional model of discourse is no longer functional. A model that looks at athletes as machines that should be given specific drills and strategies that will make them ultimately successful (Cassidy, Jones, Potrac 118). An alternative model suggested in the same book views athletes differently; athletes are human beings with fluctuating and individualized wants and needs. This new philosophy is a paradigm shift in coaching rhetoric:

“[It] reflects an altered performance pedagogy based on a structured freedom, which emphasizes the importance of the individual within the collective and the social responsibilities of athletes and coaches.”

Hettinger explains that a great way to begin applying this new philosophy is simply to talk to players about what they need. Players possess a wealth of knowledge about what works for them and what their primary weaknesses are. It takes a certain humility from coaches to realize that they don’t have all the answers and that drawing on the players knowledge will not only benefit the team but also empower the players, giving them ownership in the decision making process.

Despite compelling evidence that this traditional coaching model of discourse needs to change, taking action is still very difficult. “Discourse and language reflect our beliefs and values, and hence attempts to amend them are often met with some resistance” (Cassidy, Jones, Potrac 118). What you say is essentially equivalent to your character and so changing that can be painful, not just for coaches but also for players:

As both coaches and athletes have become socialized into accepting their complementary roles, they are bound to feel uncomfortable and uncertain when the boundaries shift. Thus, a coach could experience resistance from athletes if he or she attempts to change the discourse to one that is unfamiliar (Cassidy, Jones, Potrac 118)

Because of the resistance from both players and coaches sensitivity must be exercised. A change of discourse could change an entire team so a slow incremental transition while provide the least pushback (Hettinger).

Within the realm of this new alternative discourse there are many ways that the rhetoric used can be specifically tailored to reach and impact players. For example considering gender and racial biases brought by both coaches and players. In the study done by Schinke, players noted that immigrant coaches who came in with no preconceived notions or stereotypes were able to engage meaningfully with their athletes. Essentially they were interested in their personal stories rather then how society viewed them (Schinke). Additionally some native coaches would try to pretend they were “color blind” and ignore the differences while immigrant coaches recognized individual needs and “[sought] to understand the differences” (Schinke). The study found that when coaches were able to break down stereotypes and racial barriers this allowed “respectful negotiations to take place and facilitated the coach-athlete interactions.”

Analyzing and breaking down gender biases can be more difficult because no matter where we come from, these types of biases are instilled in us. From my primary research I gathered that most women prefer male coaches. This observation was affirmed by Melinda Frey’s research study. She found that typical qualities associated with a male like rigid structure, discipline, and confidence were all things that people saw a good coach having. Females in the study expressed that while their female coaches were much better at building personal relationships and being open about emotion, these were not as important qualities for a coach (Frey). The action step for coaches to respond to this data is quite simple but not easy to execute. Coaches must be willing to step out of their traditional gender roles often and express the best coaching discourse strategies.

The pregame speech is a unique avenue of discourse that is always communicated publicly but can have a huge impact on the players. However many of the same ideas apply to speeches that function for interpersonal communication. For example in my research I found that coaches should not be afraid to inspire fear and anger into their players in order to motivate them. However to maintain positive in the player’s eyes the coach must balance this with making players feel encouraged and happy. One the interesting qualities that most of the best coaches possessed to achieve this balancing act was humor. Humor can be used to lighten the mood and as sarcasm but regardless it has great effects on players and helps encourage them in the coming game. McMurphy points out that good encouragement is the key. Not just giving players affirmations but giving them a challenge. Declaring that they have made it to this game for a reason and it is their “destiny” to win it (McMurphy). Employing the language of fate while utilizing humor, is one of the great strategies to creating inspiring speeches.

All the different ways discourse can be improved are affected by technology. Modern sports technology is allowing new ways that coaches can discover exactly what a player needs and deliver the proper form of rhetoric best suited to communicate or fulfill that need. According to an article on technology and how its changed sports for coaches, wearable tech and tracking devices have revolutionized how training and recovery is done. Coaches now are able to know exactly when to send their players back in the game when their injury is completely healed. They can give specific information on how long they will be out and what they should expect during recovery. All this allows the coach to do less guessing and to deliver more precise information (Devitt). Dickson explains that VR is also a very new technology that is allowing training in virtual environments. Players can simulate in game situations and actually work their physical muscles allowing them to develop the correct motor movements (Dickson). All this new technology can provide great tools to the coaches. They can’t replace a human coach but then help sharpen the rhetoric used by coaches leading to a better player coach relationship.

Rhetoric in coaching is a vast and complex subject with many options. While their are many ideas one seems to be rising above the rest. A philosophy that looks at athletes not as machines but human beings that need to be nurtured and given freedom. Coaches need to be aware of gender and racial specific biases and how they can best tailor their rhetoric to support their strengths and weaknesses. The use of humor can also be a great tool coaches can use was it is acceptable. Additionally technology can be an amazing tool in sharpening the rhetoric used and giving proof for decisions and critiques. Coaches are responsible an entire team and overall they need to bring an awareness. An awareness on how they can improve what they say and how their players communicate. How they can create not just better athletes but better people as well.

In 1980 during the insurmountable fear of the Cold War a coach united his team. A man was hired to coach the 1980’s U.S. men's Olympic hockey team. Initially the team was made up of arrogant college stars. Throughout the season Brooks united his team around one mission: beating the Soviets. His speeches and talks with players inspired, angered and made fearful many of their hearts. However he was able to balance these powerful emotions so that the individuals could become one and beat a team that was far superior. This is the story of Herb Brooks and a team that transcended its sport and united a nation under one banner of hope and freedom (Renee).

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